

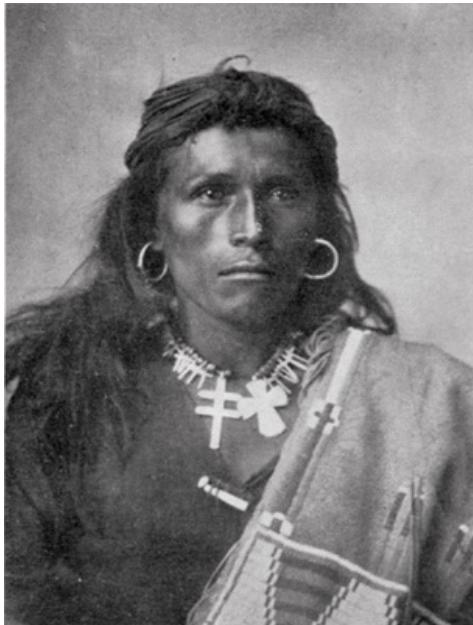
Indian Boarding Schools In the United States Fact Sheet



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1. WHEN AND WHY DID THE U.S. GOVERNMENT START 'INDIAN' BOARDING SCHOOLS?



Tom Torlino Navajo
before and 3 years after
entering Carlisle.

(commissioned by Pratt thru John Choate)

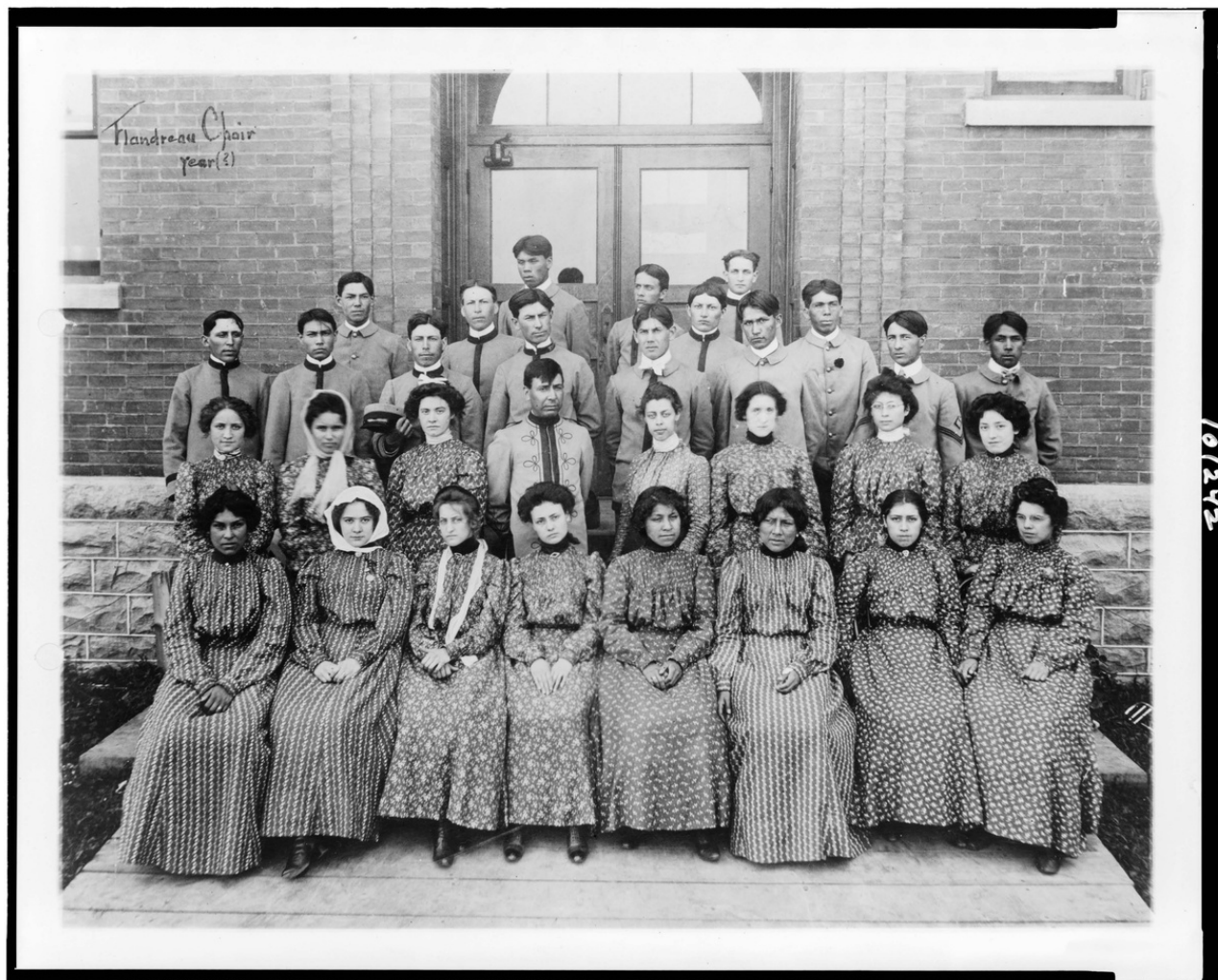
The Office of Indian Affairs established under the War Department in 1824 was a steppingstone toward 'manifest destiny' and enforcement of U.S. ambitions for westward expansion. Their very first mission was to remove the southeastern tribal nations by threat, deceit and force, including marching them 1,000 miles westward - leaving thousands behind in hasty graves along the Trail of Tears. Complete disruption of the Indigenous way of life was cemented by treaties from 1778 through 1871. More than 500 treaties were made with the tribes and virtually all have been broken, disregarded or underfunded. This period also coincides with formation of the 'Indian reservation' system - but 98 percent of the land allocated to tribes was taken back by the U.S. government.

During this same period, the U.S. government equated 'Indian education' with 'assimilation' - meaning Native peoples would forego their way of life and blend into the settlers' culture. One of the best ways to achieve this 'civilizing' process was the boarding school system. Location was key - Indian boarding schools had to be located off-reservation where Native youth could be distanced from their families and traditions.

The first such school is also the most infamous - the Carlisle Indian Industrial School led by Captain Richard Henry Pratt opened in Pennsylvania in 1879. Congress authorized funding and located the school in abandoned Army barracks.

Pratt's primary goal was to 'Kill the Indian, Save the Man' and seek complete assimilation or 'Americanization.'

Another Indian School Superintendent, John B. Riley said, "The parents of these Indian children are ignorant, and know nothing of the value of education. Only by complete isolation of the Indian child from his savage antecedents can he be satisfactorily educated."



Flandreau School Choir between 1909 and 1932
(Library of Congress)

2. HOW DID THE U.S. INDIAN BOARDING SCHOOLS IMPACT NATIVE CHILDREN?

For starters, Pratt required that all the children wear uniforms, change their names, stop speaking in their native language, stop eating their traditional foods, and all the boys were subjected to haircuts removing their braids. But there was more... Native children had no role models and learned no parenting skills. The children were set up to be completely dependent on a system. And, history was taught with a definite white bias, as it still is in schools today. Columbus was celebrated, and on Memorial Day, some students were forced to decorate the graves of soldiers sent to kill their fathers.

Discipline was severe, including confinement, deprivation of privileges, threat of corporal punishment or dietary restriction. Implanting Christian ideas of sin and guilt were deemed essential to the cause as well, and most girls were locked in their dorms at night - unable to get out even in the event of fire.

Students were used for slave labor and at the same time told they were destined to lead the life of a "blanket degenerate Indian."



Carlisle 1890 Luther Standing Bear (Wikipedia by John Choate)

In fact, by 1900, economics took over and the curriculum slanted more toward industrial training while academics languished – a total failure on the part of the schools. Epidemics, overcrowding and poor ventilation at the schools killed many children, as did rape, abuse and other acts of violence. The atrocities that occurred also set up trauma that fueled substance abuse and generational trauma that still exists today.

[Source: <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/timeline/385.html>]

Luther Standing Bear (Ponca) shared this testimony about his boarding school experience:

“Almost immediately our names were changed to those in common use in the English language... I was told to take a pointer and select a name for myself from the list written on the blackboard. I did, and since one was just as good as another, as I could not distinguish any difference in them, I placed the pointer on the name Luther.” —Luther Standing Bear, *My People, the Sioux*, 1928

[Source: <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/timeline/357.html>]

It was Standing Bear that would later challenge General Crook in federal court, leading to the ruling that Indians are “persons” under federal law. This landmark decision began to reverse decades of oppressive Indian policy.



Rapid City boarding school that operated 1898-1933
(South Dakota Historical Society)

3. HOW DID THE U.S. ENFORCEMENT OF BOARDING SCHOOLS IMPACT NATIVE FAMILIES?

Broken families experienced an immediate impact from the boarding schools through loss of language, parenting skills, and inability to pass on Native culture and traditions – and these losses have continued through the generations. Their children were removed from their homes like hostages. Many children disappeared while enrolled in boarding schools. Many were beaten and abused psychologically, changing them forever from the children their families once knew.

Some Indian parents banded together to withdraw their children en masse, encouraging runaways and undermining the schools' influence during summer and school breaks. An 1893 court ruling increased pressure to keep Indian children in boarding schools. It was not until 1978 with the passing of the Indian Child Welfare Act that Native parents gained the legal right to deny their children's placement in off-reservation schools.



Apache children in Carlisle school (Florida State Library)



Chemawa Boarding School (Oregon State Library)

In his book, "We've Done Them Wrong," George Saurman, author and former member of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, notes:

"When I realized I had been through school, college, and 33 years in [state and local] government and never heard of any of the difficulties that existed for Indians, I was shocked and started to look into it. Kevin Gover's BIA speech matched what I found in my research. The worst fact of all was the boarding schools, the brainwashing, harsh treatment, and the indoctrination of children. The separation from family and culture that was imposed on the children created a big gap in their development and it was a deliberate attempt to 'kill the Indian and save the child' as far as the schools were concerned. This was the motto and it was shocking to me that it took place."

Saurman continues:

"I see the boarding schools as largely responsible for what's happening on the reservations today... [2000 BIA Director] Gover indicated this [motto] was official policy, and he apologized because the formation of the Department of the Interior (DOI) was intended to protect the Indians, but it had done just the opposite."

4. WHY ARE 'INDIAN' BOARDING SCHOOLS SUCH AN UNTOLD STORY?

Very little attention has been given to the dismal failure of the boarding school system or the long-lasting impact it has had on Native communities. Numerous boarding schools across the U.S. have never reconciled for their atrocities. In fact, some of them overseen by DOI still operate today, such as Flandreau in South Dakota and Chemawa in Oregon. Others, such as Haskell Indian Nations University, have a small cemetery on campus with tombstones to recognize a handful of children who died early in the school's history. From 1898 to 1933, the Rapid City Indian School had community members working together to locate the graves of some children who perished during their time at the school. We know this is not complete or wholly representative of the type of injustice, trauma, and generational effects boarding schools have had on Native communities.

It's an embarrassment to acknowledge breaking the trust of children, giving them a broken education system and allowing this to fuel social inequity for decades. Shame also coincides with rape and other forms of abuse that happened to Native youth as part of the untold story. But more people are stepping up today to give a voice to this brutal part of U.S. history. In fact, when leaders such as former Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Director Kevin Gover step up, it empowers others to do the same.

Gover said in 2000,

"This agency forbade the speaking of Indian languages, prohibited the conduct of traditional religious activities, outlawed traditional government, and made Indian people ashamed of who they were. Worst of all, the Bureau of Indian Affairs committed these acts against the children entrusted to its boarding schools, brutalizing them emotionally, psychologically, physically, and spiritually. Even in this era of self-determination... the legacy of these misdeeds haunts us. The trauma of shame, fear and anger has passed from one generation to the next... So many of the maladies suffered today in Indian country result from the failures of this agency. Poverty, ignorance and disease have been the product of this agency's work. And so today I stand before you as the leader of an institution that in the past has committed acts so terrible that they infect, diminish and destroy the lives of Indian people decades later, generations later... These things occurred despite the efforts of many good people with good hearts who sought to prevent them. These wrongs must be acknowledged if the healing is to begin... The Bureau of Indian Affairs was born in 1824 in a time of war on Indian people. May it live in the year 2000 and beyond as an instrument of their prosperity."

5. HOW CAN CONCERNED CITIZENS MAKE A DIFFERENCE TODAY?



Take the time to learn about Native American history through Native-published resources and make others more [NativeAware.](#)



Research your own state to determine if there are any Indian residential/boarding schools today.



Read about the early Indian boarding schools, the real purpose behind them, and their failures that cast a dark shadow over Native lives that has carried on through the generations.



Believe that every youth counts, every graduation matters. [Advocate for the achievement](#) of equal educational opportunities for Native American youth.



Show that you care. [Support the work](#) being done by PWNA and other Native-led and Native-serving nonprofits. It is critically important, yet less than one percent of all charitable giving in the U.S. supports Native causes.



RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Organizations:

- IndigenousFoundations.arts.ubc.ca is an information resource on the history, politics and cultures of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, with a section on the residential school system - https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_residential_school_system/
- Boarding School Healing is a good resource that helped during the pandemic - <https://boardingschoolhealing.org>
- Remember the Children, based in Rapid City, South Dakota, is led by community volunteers to help families locate the unmarked graves of relatives lost to the Rapid City Boarding School. This resource includes a two-part presentation called "An Inconvenient Truth" - <https://www.rememberingthechildren.org/>

Videos:

- "Canada's Dark Secret" by Al Jazeera - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=peLd_jtMdrc
- "Unspoken: America's Native American Boarding School" narrated by Peter Coyote - <https://video.kqed.org/video/unspoken-americas-native-american-boarding-schools-oobt1r/>
- "The 7th Generation" by Jim Warne (Oglala Lakota) includes interviews with boarding school survivors - <https://www.amazon.com/7th-Generation-Jim-Warne/dp/B07BFW14CZ>
- "Our Spirits Don't Speak English" is a Native perspective on boarding schools - <https://www.amazon.com/Our-Spirits-Dont-Speak-English/dp/B00196NHAO>
- "Indian Horse," an adaptation of the Canada-based book by Richard Wagamese - <https://www.indianhorse.ca/en/film>

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES CONTINUED

Background Resources:

- “Treaties Made, Treaties Broken” - <http://blog.nativepartnership.org/treaties-made-treaties-broken/>
- “Indians Are ‘Persons’” - <http://blog.nativepartnership.org/indians-are-persons-standing-bears-speech/>
- “We’ve Done Them Wrong” - <http://blog.nativepartnership.org/interview-weve-done-them-wrong/>
- Gover’s 175th BIA Anniversary Speech - http://www.tribal-institute.org/lists/kevin_gover.htm
- Indian Child Welfare Act - <http://blog.nativepartnership.org/indian-child-welfare-act-a-closer-look/>
- Boarding Schools - http://www.nativepartnership.org/site/PageServer?pagename=PWNA_Native_History_boardingschoolsNP



NOTES:



Southwest Program Office:
Partnership With Native Americans
1310 E Riverview Dr
Phoenix, AZ 85034
1-877-281-0808

Corporate Office:
Partnership With Native Americans
16415 Addison Road Suite 200
Addison, Texas 75001
www.nativepartnership.org
1-800-416-8102

Northern Plains Program Office:
Partnership With Native Americans
2401 Eglin St
Rapid City, SD 57703
1-866-556-2472

@PWNA4hope

